

Buddhism and Suicide

(Please note that this handout is a reproduction of an article written by D. Keown.)

Suicide is an important issue in Buddhist ethics as it raises basic questions about autonomy and the value of human life, and plays a pivotal role in related questions such as physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Martin Wiltshire wrote in the opening paragraph of one of his articles that “We should, perhaps, point out that suicide first presented itself to us as an intriguing subject of enquiry when we discovered that it appeared to be regarded equivocally within the Canon, that it was both censored and condoned” (Wiltshire 1983). The view that suicide is regarded equivocally in the canon goes back at least to the 1920s. In his 1922 entry on suicide in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, de La Vallee Poussin wrote:

We have therefore good reason to believe (1) that suicide is not an ascetic act leading to spiritual progress and to nirvāṇa, and (2) that no saint or arhat-- a spiritually perfect being-- will kill himself. But we are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that we are mistaken in these two important conclusions (1922:25).

In the same year F.L. Woodward expressed a similar opinion:

There are, however, passages in the *Nikāyas* where the Buddha approves of the suicide of bhikkhus: but in these cases they were Arahants, and we are to suppose that such beings who have mastered self, can do what they please as regards the life and death of their carcase (1922: 8).

In a more recent encyclopedia entry Marilyn J. Harran wrote that “Buddhism in its various forms affirms that, while suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an arhat, one who has attained enlightenment, it is still very much the exception to the rule” (1993: 129). Views of this kind have influenced Western scholarship over the past eighty years. In recent times Becker-- going beyond the evidence of the texts-- has spoken of the Buddha’s “praise” of the suicides of Vakkali and Channa (1993:136) and claimed that there is a “consistent Buddhist position” (1993: 137) on suicide (a permissive one).

Various attempts, for the most part along similar lines, have been made to explain why suicide is prohibited for the unenlightened but permitted for the enlightened. In 1987 Lamotte wrote:

The desperate person who takes his own life obviously aspires to annihilation: his suicide, instigated by desire, will not omit him from fruition, and he will have to partake of the fruit of his action. In the case of the ordinary man, suicide is a folly and does not achieve the intended aim (Lamotte 1987: 110).

This situation is compared with the suicide of an enlightened person:

In contrast, suicide is justified in the persons of the Noble Ones who have already cut off desire and by so doing neutralised their actions by making them incapable of producing further fruit. From the point of view of early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of the Noble Ones who, having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into *Nirvāṇa*, thus definitively escaping from the world of rebirths (1987:106f).

The significant distinction for Lamotte, then, is that the Arhat acts without desire whereas the unenlightened person does not. Wiltshire shares this view, commenting that “suicide is salvifically fatal in most cases, but not for the arahant, since he cannot be motivated by *taṇhā*” (S.I.121). Becker, too, sees the morality of suicide as turning entirely on motivation and says that “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with taking one’s own life if not done in hate, anger or fear” (1993:137).

However, Buddhism believes that there is something intrinsically wrong with taking one’s own life (or indeed taking any life), and that motivation-- although of great importance in the assessment of the moral status of actions-- is not the sole criterion of rightness. Keown’s objection in “allowing a determining role to motivation is that it leads in the direction of an ethical theory known as Subjectivism. Subjectivism holds that right and wrong are simply a function of the actor’s mental states, and... that the same action (suicide) can be either right or wrong depending on the state of mind of the person who commits suicide: the presence of desire (or fear) makes it wrong, and the absence of desire (or fear) makes it right” (Keown 1996: 9). Subjectivism leads to the conclusion that suicide can be right for one person but wrong for another, or even right and wrong for the same person at different times, as his state of mind changes, and desire comes and goes. The suggestion that suicide is right for Arhats but wrong for non-Arhats also seems strange in another respect. Arhats and Buddha’s are held up by the tradition as moral paradigms: in all circumstances to imitate a Buddha or an Arhat is to do right. In this one respect the unenlightened should not emulate the enlightened. There seems no obvious reason why suicide (and not murder, stealing, or lying) should constitute a “special case.”

Of the three canonical suicide cases, two-- those of Channa and Godhika-- are recounted in the conventional canonical format for describing visits to the sick [For example S.v.344 (Dīghāvu); S.iv.55, M.iii.263 (Channa); S.iii.119 (Vakkali); S.iii.124 (Assaji); M.iii.258, S.v.380 (Anāthapiṇḍika)]. Visiting the sick is regarded as a worthy activity for monks (Vin.v.230). The following pattern is typical of such accounts, although there is considerable variation:

1. Patient is introduced by name with a stock description of his condition (“afflicted, suffering and gravely ill”).
2. Patient sends an emissary asking for a religious visit.
3. A senior disciple or the Buddha comes to visit.
4. Visitor expresses the hope that the condition is improving but patient reports the condition is deteriorating.
5. Visitor delivers a sermon then leaves.
6. Something happens to the patient (recovers, dies, commits suicide).
7. News of what has transpired is reported to the Buddha.
8. The Buddha makes a pronouncement.

Several other cases follow the pattern of the suicides but without ending in self-inflicted death. Wiltshire, however, treats these as relevant to the issue of suicide:

Owing to their fundamental resemblance to the indubitable suicide stories, we shall treat these as relevant to the issue. The problem of decipherment is partly created by the Pāli locution *katakāla* (lit., “making an end”) which is used both for death by natural causes and for suicide (1983: 132).

Wiltshire goes astray here in two respects. The first is a minor one: the compound *katakāla* does not occur in the canon and the term invariably used is *kālakata*. More important, however, is his suggestion that this term is used for suicides. There is no reason to suppose from the contexts that any of

the 174 occurrences of this term in the canon involve death by suicide. *Kālakata* simply means “dead,” and in the absence of further qualification there is no reason to think it denotes suicide any more than the use of the English word “dead” implies a death by suicide. It is noteworthy that the term *kālakata* is not used anywhere in connection with the three *bhikkhu* suicide cases: instead all three are said to have “used the knife” (*satthaṃ āhasesi*). Here we take this (with the commentary) in a literal sense to mean that a knife (or similar sharp instrument) was actually employed. The commentary states that Channa “severed his windpipe” (*kaṇṭhanālaṃ chindī*). It is possible that “using the knife” could be a locution which denotes suicide by any means, but this seems unlikely given that, as Wiltshire notes (1983:130), a razor is part of a monk’s “kit” (although apparently not referred to as *sattha*). It seems likely that “using the knife” is meant in a literal sense, since the layman who commits suicide at M.ii.109f is not said to have “used the knife” but to have cut or ripped himself open (*attānaṃ upphālesi*). By including the other cases in his discussion of suicide Wiltshire gives the impression that suicide was more common than it was. Assuming these stories to be connected with the three suicides, he writes:

The stories which belong in this category are those of the *bhikkhu* Assaji (S.III.124)-- this story succeeds Vakkali’s in the *Samyutta* text and shares the same format, apart from not mentioning his death; it was probably thought superfluous to mention this, as the primary object of these *suttas* is convey doctrine on the *khandhas* -- and of the two *upāsakas* Anāthapiṇḍika (M.III.258; S.V.380) and Diḥhāvu (S.V.344) (1983: 132).

There is no reason to link any of these stories to the suicides, and it is pure speculation to assume that any of the deaths involved a suicidal intent. As Wiltshire himself notes, the suicide cases are clearly distinguished by the reference to the monks “using the knife,” but there is no reference to this in any of the cases mentioned above. As far as Assaji is concerned, the text reports (S.v.380ff) that he is gravely ill with a breathing complaint. The Buddha visits and gives teachings but, as Wiltshire notes, no mention is made of the patient’s death. Anāthapiṇḍika is visited once by Sāriputta (unusually, his pains disappear!) and once by Ānanda. In neither case is his death reported nor is there any mention of death being contemplated. The episode of Diḥhāvu (A.v.344), a lay-disciple, follows the familiar pattern. Diḥhāvu is seriously ill and his condition is deteriorating. He requests a visit from the Buddha who comes and give teachings. Diḥhāvu dies and the Buddha reveals that he has been reborn as a non-returner (*anāgāmin*).

In fact there are only two cases in the canon which give any reason at all for thinking that suicide may be condoned, those of Channa and Vakkali. Other canonical suicides include those of the unnamed monks in the *Vinaya* whose deaths led to the promulgation of the third *pārājika*. At M.ii.109f (supra) a husband kills his wife and then himself so they will not be separated. Cases of attempted suicide leading to enlightenment include those of the monk Sappadāsa in the *Theragāthā* (408), and the nun Sīhā in the *Therīgāthā* (77) (Cf. Rahula 1978:22f). At Ud. 92f. the aged Arhat Dabba rises in the air and disappears in a puff of smoke. There is a similar passage on Bakkula at M.iii.124-8. In the third case-- that of Godhika-- the Buddha voices no opinion at all on the monk’s suicide. Even in the case of Vakkali the Buddha simply predicts that Vakkali’s death will not be “ill” (*apāpika*)-- a statement which could be interpreted in a variety of ways.[It may be intended as simple reassurance to Vakkali that he has nothing to fear from death, or a prediction that he will die an Arhat]. Only in one case-- that of Channa-- is anything resembling exoneration given after the event. This takes the form of a short statement by the Buddha which is translated by F. L. Woodward as follows:

For whoso, Sāriputta, lays down one body and takes up another body, of him I say “He is to blame.” But it is not so with the brother Channa. Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa (KS.IV.33).

In her introductory essay to the *Majjhima Nikāya* translation Horner seems to suggest that the compilers of the canon had actually “rigged” the text in order to exonerate Channa. Of the Buddha’s exonerating statement she writes “they make him [the Buddha] sanction the unworthy act of the poor little sufferer” (xi).

The first point to note is that the Buddha does not explicitly state that he condones suicide by Arhats. He neither says this here, nor does he say it anywhere else. What the Buddha actually says in the first part of his statement is something slightly different, namely that what he regards as blameworthy is grasping after a new body. This is little more than an affirmation of standard Buddhist doctrine. The Buddha could be seen here, as on numerous other occasions, as skillfully taking advantage of the context to make a point about the importance of remaining focused on the goal. In other words, Channa’s death becomes a poignant occasion for the Buddha to emphasize the urgency of putting an end to rebirth [For example, when asked about worshipping the six directions in the *Sigālovāda Sutta* he deftly switches the context to social relationships].

The trickier bit to explain, however, is the final part of the statement where the Buddha says “Without reproach was the knife used by the brother Channa.” This does not necessarily mean that Buddhism *condones* suicide. Exoneration and condonation are two different things. Exoneration is the removal of a burden (*onus*) of guilt, while condonation is the approval of what is done. These two terms reflect the distinction-- well established in Western ethics and law-- between the wrongfulness of acts and the guilt incurred by those who commit them. Although an act may be wrong in itself, the burden of guilt incurred in its commission may vary. Self-defence, provocation, duress, and insanity are all grounds which mitigate otherwise wrongful acts. It is also widely recognized with respect to suicide in particular that there may be psychological and other factors present which diminish responsibility. This is one reason suicide has been decriminalized in many jurisdictions.

If, like Woodward, we translate the Buddha’s concluding statement to the effect that Channa used the knife “without reproach,” it could mean simply *that*-- that the Buddha felt it would be improper to blame or reproach Channa (or someone in his situation). This need not mean that suicide is morally right: it simply acknowledges that the burden of guilt in many circumstances may be slight or non-existent. Thus we might say in the present case the Buddha is exonerating *Channa* rather than condoning *suicide*. Wiltshire makes a similar point:

Apart from representing putative cases of suicide, these stories share one further overriding theme-- each of the protagonists is suffering from a serious degenerative illness-- So, when we try to understand why they are exonerated, it is initially necessary to appreciate that their act is not gratuitously performed, but constrained by force of circumstances (1983:132).

The story of Channa occurs in two places in the canon, once in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (*Sutta* 144) and once in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S.18.72(107):10ff). We will first of all summarise the narrative in the main text and then consider the views of the commentary.

The *Channovāda Sutta* relates how Sāriputta, Mahācunda and Channa were residing on Gijjhakūṭa. Channa was “afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill.” Arising from his evening meditation, Sāriputta suggests to Mahācunda that they visit the ailing Channa, which they do. Enquiring about Channa’s health they are told that his condition is deteriorating rather than improving. The nature of the illness itself is not diagnosed but the symptoms are described in stock terms identical to those of the layman Anāthapiṇḍika in the preceding *sutta*. Both men complain of intense pain in the head and stomach, and throughout the body generally. The head pain is said to be like having one’s head split open with a sharp sword, or having a leather strap progressively tightened around the head like a headband. The stomach pain is compared to having one’s belly carved up by a sharp knife, in the way a butcher might carve up an ox’s belly. The

body pain is likened to that of being roasted over a pit of hot coals. The head and stomach pains are attributed to the action of “violent winds” (*adhimattā vātā*), but no specific cause is mentioned for the more diffuse but no less intense bodily pain.

After describing his condition, Channa declares “I shall use the knife, friend Sāriputta, I have no desire to live.” On hearing this the immediate response of Sāriputta is to dissuade Channa from taking his life:

Let the venerable Channa not use the knife! Let the venerable Channa live-- we want the venerable Channa to live!

If he lacks suitable food, I will go in search of suitable food for him. If he lacks suitable medicine, I will go in search of suitable medicine for him. If he lacks a proper attendant, I will attend on him. Let the venerable Channa not use the knife! Let the venerable Channa live-- we want the venerable Channa to live!

In response to this entreaty-- which encapsulates the normative Buddhist stance on suicide-- Channa explains that he lacks neither food, medicine or care. He then remarks, somewhat obliquely, that he has long served the teacher with love as is proper for a disciple, before repeating his intention to “use the knife”:

Friend Sāriputta, it is not that I have no suitable food and medicine or no proper attendant. But rather, friend Sāriputta, the Teacher has long been served by me with love, not without love; for it is proper for the disciple to serve the Teacher with love, not without love. Friend Sāriputta, remember this: the monk Channa will use the knife blamelessly.

There is no logical connection between the three ideas in this passage (I have suitable food -- I have served the teacher -- I will use the knife) which suggests some textual interpolation may have taken place. In her translation of the *Majjhima* passage, Horner seems to suggest that Channa regards his previous reverence for the teacher as the justification for his planned course of action: “No, friend Sāriputta. I am not without proper food. I have it. I am not without proper clothing. I have it. I am not without fit attendants. I have them. I myself, friend, waited on the Master for many a long day with service that was delightful, not tedious. That, friend, is the proper thing for a disciple to do. ‘In so far as he served the Master with a service that was delightful, not tedious, blameless (must be accounted) the brother Channa’s use of the knife’: so should you uphold, friend Sāriputta.” (KS.II.31). The text reads: *Etam hi āvuso sāvakassa paṭiruupam satthāram paricareyya manāpeneva no amanāpena tam anupavajjam channo bhikkhu sattham āharissatiti evametam āvuso sāriputta dhārehiiti*. Horner’s reading arises from taking the *yam-tam* construction as a separate sentence having the sense of “In so far as -- to that extent.” However, the *tam* is not present in all manuscripts, and in any event a more plausible reading is to take the *yam* clause as correlative to the initial *etam* rather than the *tam*, in the sense of illustrating what is “proper” (*paṭirūpa*) to a disciple rather than announcing a state of affairs which is subsequently justified in the *tam* clause. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi do not follow Horner in their translation in *The Middle Length Discourses of The Buddha*, Wisdom, 1995). More important, however, is that in claiming that his action will be blameless (*anupavajja*) Channa now introduces a moral dimension to his earlier declaration of suicide.

Or does he? The commentary offers an interesting gloss on the term *anupavajja*, the key word which will later be used by the Buddha apparently in exoneration. The commentary offers two synonyms for *anupavajja* in this context: the first is *anuppattika* meaning “without further arising,” and the second is *appaṭisandhika* which means “not leading to rebirth.” (MA.10.237 (390)). Read this way Channa is

saying “Sāriputta, I will use the knife and not be reborn-- remember I said this.” According to the commentary, then, Channa is making a factual statement-- perhaps a prediction-- rather than passing a moral judgement on suicide.

After this the subject changes and first Sāriputta and then Mahācunda speak to Channa on matters of doctrine. Both elders then get up and leave, and soon afterwards Channa “uses the knife.” Sāriputta then approaches the Buddha and-- clearly believing that Channa was not an Arhat-- asks for information about Channa’s post-mortem destination (*gati*) and future course (*abhisamparāya*). The Buddha’s response betrays a degree of impatience and implies that Sāriputta should already know the answer: “But surely, Sāriputta,” he says, “the monk Channa told you in person of his *anupavajjā*!” What does *anupavajjā* mean here? Since Sāriputta’s question was about rebirth, the context supports the commentarial interpretation of *anupavajja* as meaning “not being reborn” very well and makes the Buddha’s reply perfectly intelligible. The Buddha is saying something like “Wake up, Sāriputta-- you are asking me about the rebirth of someone who told you himself he was *anupavajja*-- not going to be reborn!” To take *anupavajja* here in the sense of “blameless” would not fit the context nearly so well, since Sāriputta was asking for simple factual information on Channa’s destiny, not a moral judgement on the way he died.

Immediately after this exchange Sāriputta uses the term *upavajja* again in the context of Channa’s association with certain families in the Vajjian village of Pubbajira, Channa’s home town (DPPN. s.v. Channa). He refers to these families as *upavajjakulāni*. The point of Sāriputta’s remark here is not clear, neither is the meaning of *upavajjakula*. It could mean “blameworthy family” or it could mean-- as the commentary suggests-- “a family which is to be visited.” The issue, as the commentary explains it, concerns the fault of overly-close association with kin (*kulasaṃsaggadosa*), a fault to which Channa seems to have been prone.

We cannot rule out the possibility that despite the macabre context obscure puns on the meaning of *upavajja*-- the sense of which it is now difficult to recover-- are being made throughout this passage. The most likely explanation for Sāriputta’s remark about the kinfolk, however, is that he is pointing to another connection in which he had heard the term *upavajja* linked to Channa’s name. By doing so he defends himself against the Buddha’s criticism that he should know Channa’s fate. He is saying, in effect, “Well, yes, Channa did tell me his death would be *anupavajja*, but I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that since I have heard this term used of him in another context in connection with visiting certain families.”

The Buddha then concludes the discourse with the statement quoted at the start which has been taken as condoning Arhat suicide. However, when we place the Buddha’s statement in context, we see that the Buddha is offering not an exoneration of suicide but a clarification of the meaning of *anupavajja* for Sāriputta’s benefit. This is how his statement might be translated:

True, Sāriputta, there are these clansmen and relatives who were visited (*upavajjakula*) [by Channa], but I do not say he was “*saupavajja*” on that account (*ettāvatā*). By “*saupavajja*” I mean that someone lays down this body and takes up another. That is not the case with respect to Channa. Channa used the knife without being reborn (*anupavajja*). This is how you should understand it, Sāriputta.

It is noteworthy that in the *Samyutta* version quoted above, the term *anupavajja* is contrasted not as we might expect with *upavajja*-- the normal word for “blameworthy”-- but with *saupavajja*, a word which seems created specifically for this context, since the only two occurrences in the entire canon are found in the passage just quoted. This seems to confirm that *upavajja* is not being used here in its everyday sense of “blameworthy,” and that the contrast intended is between *anupavajja* as “not reborn” and *saupavajja* as “is reborn.”

By taking the key term *anupavajja* in the way suggested by the commentary, which seems to fit the context well, the Buddha’s concluding remark becomes not an exoneration of suicide but a clarification of the meaning of an ambiguous word in a context which has nothing to do with ethics.

The main text makes no reference to Channa gaining enlightenment. We know that Channa *died*

an Arhat by inference from the Buddha's closing statement, although there is no corroborating evidence that Channa was an Arhat and no indication of when he became one. Curiously, it is this question of the timing of Channa's enlightenment which concerns the commentary most, and it devotes a good deal of effort to show that Channa was not an Arhat before he committed suicide. It seeks to establish this in two ways.

First, it volunteers a rationale for the specific teaching given to Channa by Mahācunda. The commentary suggests that Mahācunda gave this teaching because he deduced from Channa's inability to bear the pain of the illness, and his threat to take his life, that he was still an unenlightened person (*puthujjana*). The attribution of this motive to Mahācunda is speculative, since the text says nothing at all about his motives for selecting the teaching in question. Nor is Channa referred to in the text as an "unenlightened person" (*puthujjana*).

Second, the commentary reconstructs Channa's last moments of life to make it very clear that enlightenment was gained at the last second:

"He used the knife" means he used a knife which removes life-- he cut his throat. Now in that very moment the fear of death possessed him, and the sign of his next birth (*gatinimitta*) arose. Knowing he was unenlightened he was stirred (*saṃviggo*) and aroused insight. Apprehending the formations (*saṅkhāra*) he attained Arhatship and entered nirvana simultaneous with his death (*samasīsī hutvā*).

The claim of the commentary is thus that Channa was a *samasīsīn* ("equal headed"), that is to say someone who dies and attains nirvāna simultaneously [The same claim is made about Vakkali and Godhika. The concept of the *samasīsī* is put to good use by the commentary in these cases. Buddhaghosa explains there are three kind of *samasīsī*. i) *Iriyāpatha-samasīsī*: someone selects one of the four postures and resolves not to change posture until they attain Arhatship. The change of posture and Arhatship occur together. ii) *Roga samasīsī*: someone recovers from an illness and attains Arhatship at the same time. iii) *Jīvita-samasīsī*: the destruction of the *āsava*s (*āsavakkhaya*) and the end of life (*jīvitakkhaya*) occur simultaneously. It is the third which is intended here [SA.11.175(159):6-11]. This reconstruction of Channa's death is likewise speculative, since no details at all are supplied in the text. Horner's verdict on the commentarial version of events is: "The facts could not have been known, and it seems a rather desperate effort to work up a satisfactory reason for this supposed attainment" (KS. V.33). While it seems true that the commentary's reconstruction can never be verified, the possibility of achieving "sudden enlightenment" at the critical point "betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat"-- as Robert Burton put it in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* -- is recognised in Pāli sources, and there are several examples of people gaining enlightenment just as they are about to kill themselves [There are cases of "sudden enlightenment" reported in Pāli sources as well as Mahāyāna ones. Rahula writes: "Examples of this kind of 'sudden' awakening or 'sudden' attainment of arahantship are not lacking also in Pāli commentaries." He cites three examples, the last from the *Theragāthā* commentary which is of relevance to our present theme: "Mahānāma Thera, living on a mountain, was thoroughly disgusted with his life because he was not successful in getting rid of such impure thoughts as lust, and just at the moment when he was about to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a rock, he attained arahantship" (Rahula 1978: 22). The commentarial claim that Channa was not an Arhat until his death seems also to be widely accepted in the secondary literature. Wiltshire is of the opinion that none of the three suicides were Arhats before their deaths. Discussing the case of Godhika he writes:

It so happens that in the other bhikkhu suicide cases, those of Channa and Vakkali, it is also made quite clear that they too were not arahants until the event of their death, after which the Buddha pronounces them *parinibbuta* (1983: 134).

More interesting than the truth or falsity of the commentarial version of events, however, is the question why the commentary should take such pains to establish that Channa was not an Arhat. The reason would appear to be that some aspect of Channa's behaviour was incompatible with the concept held by the tradition of how an Arhat should conduct himself. In other words, there must be one or more features of Channa's behaviour that the tradition found hard to swallow in an Arhat.

The most obvious thing is that the tradition simply found it inconceivable that an Arhat would be capable of suicide. Although this is nowhere mentioned in the text or commentary on this episode, it is often stated elsewhere that it is impossible for an Arhat to do certain things, the first of which is intentionally to kill a living creature (D.III.235). Death-dealing acts of any kind are certainly not in keeping with the canonical paradigm of the calm and serene Arhat.

We are given a hint as to the second reason why the commentary might be unhappy with the notion of Channa being an Arhat prior to his suicide attempt in the motivation attributed to Mahācunda for providing his homily to Channa. The suggestion is made by the commentary that Mahācunda gave this particular teaching because he saw that Channa was "unable to tolerate the intense pain" and was seeking death in order to escape from it. The inability to tolerate pain shows a lack of self-mastery unbecoming to an Arhat. The danger of a lack of self-mastery is that a monk might do things unbecoming to his office and thereby cause the Order to lose face in the eyes of society. By maintaining that Channa was unenlightened until the very end, the image of the Arhat remains untarnished by Channa's all-too-human show of weakness in the face of pain.

The third reason the commentary might have taken exception to suicide by an Arhat is a sectarian one. Suicide by voluntary fasting (*sallekhanā*) is a well-known Jain practice. Channa's suicide, and the two others, might have been seen as uncomfortably close to a distinctive sectarian practice and perhaps an unwelcome throwback to the discredited path of self-mortification. The commentary's rejection of suicide by Arhats, therefore, may also carry an implicit rejection of Jainism. The Pāli canon suicide cases could provide interesting evidence in connection with Bronkhorst's theory regarding "non-authentic" elements in the Buddhist texts. The criterion for such examples is as follows: "Perhaps the only hope ever to identify non-authentic elements in the Buddhist texts is constituted by the special cases where elements which are recorded to have been rejected by the Buddha, yet found their way into the texts, and, moreover, are clearly identifiable as belonging to one or more movements other than Buddhism" (quoted by Gombrich, p. 1070). The suicide cases seem to fit this requirement in every way: suicide is rejected by the Buddha (in the *Vinaya* and elsewhere), finds its way into the texts (in the three suicide cases), and is identifiable as a Jain practice. Whether these cases add weight to Bronkhorst's theory, however, is another matter.

What is most striking, however, is not what the commentary does say, but what it doesn't say. We might expect at least a mention of the third *pārājika*, which was introduced specifically to prevent suicide by monks (Vin.III.71). What can be the reason for this silence? Perhaps the simple explanation is that Channa's suicide was not seen to raise any pressing moral or legal issues: only if Channa was an Arhat would such questions arise. In the eyes of the commentary, Channa was an unenlightened person (*puthujjana*) who, afflicted by the pain and distress of a serious illness, took his own life. Presented in this light, few ethical problems arise: suicides by the unenlightened are a sad but all too common affair. By holding that Channa gained enlightenment only *after* he had begun the attempt on his life, the commentary neatly avoids the dilemma of an Arhat breaking the precepts.

Where does all this leave us with respect to the seventy-year consensus that suicide is permitted for Arhats? It gives us a number of reasons to question it. First, there is no reason to think that the exoneration of Channa establishes a normative position on suicide. This is because to exonerate from blame is not the same as to condone. Second, there are textual reasons for thinking that the Buddha's apparent exoneration may not be an exoneration after all. The textual issues are complex and it would not be safe to draw any firm conclusions. It might be observed in passing that the textual evidence that suicide

may be permissible in Christianity is much greater than in Buddhism. There are many examples of suicide in the Old Testament: this has not, however, prevented the Christian tradition from teaching consistently that suicide is gravely wrong. By comparison, Theravāda sources are a model of consistency in their refusal to countenance the intentional destruction of life. Third, the commentarial tradition finds the idea that an Arhat would take his own life in the way Channa did completely unacceptable. Fourth, there is a logical point which, although somewhat obvious, seems to have been overlooked in previous discussions. If we assume, along with the commentary and secondary literature, that Channa was not an Arhat prior to his suicide attempt, then to extrapolate a rule from this case such that suicide is permissible for Arhats is fallacious. The reason for this is that Channa's suicide was-- in all significant respects-- the suicide of an *unenlightened* person. The motivation, deliberation and intention which preceded his suicide-- everything down to the act of picking up the razor-- all this was done by an unenlightened person. Channa's suicide thus cannot be taken as setting a precedent for Arhats for the simple reason that he was not one himself until *after* he had performed the suicidal act. Fifth and finally, suicide is repeatedly condemned in canonical and non-canonical sources and goes directly "against the stream" of Buddhist moral teachings. A number of reasons why suicide is wrong are found in the sources.

Reasons why Buddhism might be opposed to suicide include the following:

1. It is an act of violence and thus contrary to the principle of *ahiṃsā*.
2. It is against the First Precept.
3. It is contrary to the third *pārājika* (cf. Mil. 195).
4. It is stated that "Arahants do not cut short their lives" (*na... apakkam pātentī*) Mil. 44, cf. D.ii.32/DA.810 cited by Horner (Milinda's Questions, I.61n.). Sāriputta says that an Arhat neither wishes for death nor wishes not to die: it will come when it comes (Tha.1002-3).
5. Suicide destroys something of great value in the case of a virtuous human life and prevents such a person acting in the service of others (Mil.195f.) Wiltshire states that altruism is also cited in the *Pāyāsi Sutta* as a reason for not taking one's life (1983:131). With reference to the discussion here (D.ii.330-2) he comments "This is the only passage in the *Sutta Piṭaka* in which the subject of suicide is considered in the abstract, and even then obliquely" (1983:130). Kassapa states that the virtuous should not kill themselves to obtain the results of their good kamma as this deprives the world of their good influence (D.ii.330f).
6. Suicide brings life to a premature end. As Poussin expresses it: "A man must live his allotted span of life... To that effect Buddha employs to Pāyāsi the simile of the woman who cuts open her body in order to see whether her child is a boy or a girl" (D.ii.331).
7. Self-annihilation is a form of *vibhava-taṇhā*.
8. Self-destruction is associated with ascetic practices which are rejected since "Buddhism had better methods of crushing lust and destroying sin" (Poussin, *Op. cit.*
9. There is empirical evidence provided by I Tsing. Poussin notes: "The Pilgrim I-ting says that Indian Buddhists abstain from suicide and, in general, from self-torture" (op cit).
- 10). As noted above, Sāriputta's immediate reaction is to dissuade Channa in the strongest terms from taking his life. Sāriputta's reaction suggests that suicide was not regarded among the Buddha's senior disciples as an option even meriting discussion.

On this basis suicide will be wrong because it is an irrational act. But this does not mean that it is performed while the balance of the mind is disturbed, but that it is incoherent in the context of Buddhist teachings. This is because suicide is contrary to basic Buddhist values. What Buddhism values is not death,

but life. Buddhism sees death as an imperfection, a flaw in the human condition, something to be overcome rather than affirmed. Death is mentioned in the First Noble Truth as one of the most basic aspects of suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*). A person who opts for death believing it to be a solution to suffering has fundamentally misunderstood the First Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth teaches that death is the problem, not the solution. The fact that the person who commits suicide will be reborn and live again is not important. What is significant is that through the affirmation of death he has, in his heart, embraced Māra. From a Buddhist perspective, this is clearly irrational. If suicide is irrational in this sense it can be claimed there are objective grounds for regarding it as morally wrong.

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